



JUST LIKE THAT

NOVEL

ALBA PRATALIA

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By Alba Pratalia

PREMISE

There was a time—not long ago but far enough to
be myth—when men wanked with pride.

Before shame had Wi-Fi.

Before browsers whispered, “*Are you still
watching?*”

A time of low resolution and high devotion.

And in that time...

there was Lily Thai.

Not the loudest. Not the most surgically absurd.

But the one who **meant it.**

A girl from Honolulu by way of Austin, she came
into the business like a storm made of giggles and
lube—**laughing, squirting, orgasming for real, while
half the industry still faked it like a politician’s
smile.**

She had the eyes of a saint who moonlighted in sin,
and a voice that moaned “*just like that*” in a tone

that made knees buckle in Kansas and Saskatchewan
alike.

Lily didn't play the part.

She **was** the part.

She made millions come—but more than that, she
made them *believe*.

That somewhere out there, someone really *was*
having fun.

Really moaning.

Really soaking the set.

No script could contain her.

No director could tame her.

She was the last great **wank without regret**.

And then she vanished.

Until now.

Austin. Noon.

The sun flattens everything like a hot iron. Strip malls shimmer. Dogs pant like sinners in church.

Lily Thai stands at the edge of the carwash lot, scrolling through memes and half-hearted existential crises. Tank top, high-waisted jeans, big sunglasses. Older than you remember, but not by much. Like time went soft on her out of respect.

Her Civic's almost done—she's waiting, relaxed, invisible. She *lives* invisible these days. Ten years of quiet. Yoga, tea, decent sex with people who say *namaste* before *fuck me*.

Then—

“Excuse me,” a voice says, low, like the purr of a well-maintained V8. “Are you by any chance... Lily Thai?”

She turns. Smile instinctively loads. That smile.
Boom.
Cover blown.

The man is nothing. Average build. Discount shirt.
A scent of peppermint and motor oil. But something
in the way he stands—like he’s both your father’s
warning and your daddy’s promise—makes the air
shift. This isn’t a fan. This isn’t a creep. This is
danger wearing a polite voice.

She studies him.

He doesn’t flinch.

She shrugs. “I’ve been a lot of things. Lily’s one of
them.”

He nods. “Thought so.”

The carwash bell dings. Her Civic rolls forward, wet
and gleaming.

She doesn’t move. Neither does he.

And just like that—*just like that*—something begins.
Again.

She’s about to thank him, offer a polite deflection,
when he leans in just a fraction—close enough to

ignore every other engine sputtering, every wax cycle humming.

And then, with a voice like a slow trigger pull:

“You know… watching your videos, I always made myself cum right when you came.”

No smirk. No sleaze. Just stated. As plainly as the weather. As if confessing to drinking his coffee black.

She feels it instantly. A ripple inside her. Not outrage, not shame.

Heat.

A flush rises up her chest, then down, fast—wet blooming in a place that hasn’t watered itself in months.

No one’s spoken to her like that in years. Not in that tone. Not with that *certainty*.

She looks at him again. Really looks. Nothing special. Salt-and-pepper stubble, sun-creased eyes, a left hand that's probably fixed a hundred broken things and never once dropped the ball.

She crosses her arms, but it's a shield already compromised. "That's... incredibly specific," she says, her voice just a touch huskier than before.

He doesn't apologize. Doesn't blink.

Just nods, eyes locked on hers.

"Because when you came, it felt like permission."

And just like that—

Her Civic could burn down right now and she wouldn't even look.

She lets out a breath that might've been a laugh if it weren't tangled in her throat.

He'd just said *permission*. Like she was a cathedral.

Still reeling, still wet, still pretending to be unbothered, she shifts her weight to one hip—just enough to let her hipbone remind her she still has it.

He glances toward the sun-bleached taco joint across the lot. Neon sign blinking “COLD BEER / HOT SALSA” like a dare.

Then he says it. Low. Calm. No hunger in it. Just... reverence.

“May I buy you a drink?”

Pause.

“No second intentions. I’d just be honored to drink with a myth of mine.”

Now that—*that*—melts something she didn’t even know was still frozen.

Not hit-on. Not ogled. *Honored.*

She studies him again. Doesn’t blink. Doesn’t smile.

Just says:

“Whiskey, neat. And I get the first toast.”

Inside “El Lobo Feliz”

(Which translates, she notes with dry amusement, to “The Happy Wolf”—because subtlety was shot and buried in the Texas sun.)

The place is cool, dim, wood-heavy. Ceiling fans groan like old drunks. A jukebox hums something from the '70s that smells like cigarettes and regret.

They sit in a booth that’s seen things.

He orders without looking at the menu. “Two whiskeys. Neat. The good one.”

She raises an eyebrow. He shrugs. “I’m not cheap with religion.”

When the glasses arrive, he pushes one toward her with the same care you'd use to hand someone back their panties after a long night.

She lifts hers.

"To myths," she says, locking eyes.

"The kind that fuck. And squirt. And then disappear for ten years."

They drink.

She feels it bloom down her throat like old lust waking up from hibernation.

They sit in silence a beat. The bar's quiet. Outside, someone's Civic is definitely overheating.

Finally, he says:

"You know, you gave me one of my most honest teenage orgasms. One of those 'close the door, kill the lights, hope no one hears me' moments."

She snorts. Loud. Undignified.

Then:

“I was faking.”

“I wasn’t.”

“I know.”

Another drink.

Now she’s leaning forward, her voice dropping:

“So what is this?”

“This?”

“You. Me. Myth meets fan. What happens next?”

He finishes his glass.

**“We order another round. Talk like adults. Then
maybe I walk you to your car.”**

“Still no second intentions?”

“None.”

“Pity.”

Second round lands.

The waitress winks like she knows something. She doesn't. But Lily Thai does.

He doesn't toast this time. Just cradles the glass and leans in, voice low and level, as if describing a sacred ritual:

"It was the one on the leather couch. Red heels. You wore that see-through white number, the one that tied in the front and came undone like it was rehearsed a hundred times—which it probably was."

She arches an eyebrow.

"You start slow. Just fingers at first. Legs spread wide. Camera tight on your face. You do that thing—tiny bite on your bottom lip. And then when he slides in, you let out that moan—not porn, not fake, *real*. I know real. I've memorized it."

She's not breathing now. Not blinking. Her legs cross. Then uncross.

“Your hands grab the cushion, you start panting, and then—there—‘*just like that, just like that!*’ you scream it three times. Third time’s the climax.”

She’s stunned silent. Not flattered. *Disarmed.*

“You… remember that?”

He lifts his glass.

“Played it so many times, I almost confirmed masturbation makes you blind.”

She laughs. A real laugh, full of whiskey and disbelief. Then, serious now, eyes locked on him:

“Show me.”

He pauses.

“Show you what?”

“The scene. How you watched it. Show me how you came.”

And now it's *his* turn not to breathe.

She finishes her glass in one swallow.

SLAM.

“Righ here.”

The words hang in the air like smoke from a gun just fired.

He looks around. The bar is half empty. The bartender's busy lecturing a tourist on mezcal. The waitress is on her phone, probably swiping left on everyone.

Lily raises two fingers. **“Two more shots.”**

No one argues.

When they arrive, she throws one back like a trucker with nothing to lose and slides the other to him.

Then she reaches.

Not fumbling. Not hesitant. Her hands are calm, experienced, reverent.

She undoes his belt with the slow confidence of someone defusing a bomb they built themselves.

Then the button.

Then the zipper.

Zzzzzip.

She doesn't break eye contact.

"Play the video on your phone," she says.

Like she's ordering dessert.

He hesitates only long enough to remember how hands work. Then fumbles through his phone, finds the file, and taps play.

Her voice bursts through the tiny speaker. That voice. *Her voice.*

Younger. Louder. Wetter.

"Just like that. Just like that. JUST like that."

She smirks.

“Good boy. Now show me how you watched it.”

He leans back, one hand barely holding the phone,
the other gripped to the vinyl booth like gravity's
gotten personal.

The video plays.

She watches him.

Not the screen. *Him.*

The way his brow tightens.

The twitch in his jaw when her younger voice
moans.

The way his lips part just slightly—like a man about
to confess or climax, or both.

Most men look like idiots when they come—
babbling fish, contorted toddlers mid-tantrum.

But this one...

This one grimaces like a wolf resisting a leash.

A *manly puppy*, she thinks, amused and aroused,
watching his chest rise like a battlefield tent in the
wind.

And then—

She does it.

She *mimics* him.

Every shift of his eyebrows. Every flare of his
nostrils. The barely-there lip curl.

A mirror of his lust, performed by the object of it.

He catches it—realizes the face on his dream girl is
his own, twisted in need for her—**reflected back by
her.**

He gasps. She gasps.

Except hers is calculated. Predatory. Divine.

And now she mimics something else: the face *he*
must have made the first time, watching her
younger self squirt and scream *“Just like that.”*

She mouths it now. No sound. Just lips.

“Just like that.”

And the universe hiccups.
Somewhere in a distant galaxy, God drops His
cocktail and mutters: *“Holy shit.”*

It’s not sex.

It’s not masturbation.

It’s looped self-erotic feedback on a quantum level.

**It’s like uncapping the diet coke of the cosmos and
dropping in a mentos the size of Saturn’s balls.**

She sees it before he does.

That split-second before detonation.

The quiver in the thigh.

The helpless flinch of a man losing control—not to fear, but to *her*.

He's about to scream.

A real one.

The kind they'll talk about when the bar closes and the mop hits whatever the hell landed under that table.

She smirks. Tucks that knowledge in the corner of her mouth like a cigarette.

And just as his breath shudders—
just as his lungs prepare for their aria—
she kisses him.

Deep.

Hot.

Firm enough to cage the sound like a prisoner.

He screams into her mouth, the sound punching against her tongue like thunder with nowhere to go. It tastes like lust. Like desperation. Like teenage

fantasies backlogged for years and suddenly all getting their turn.

His body bucks once. Twice.

And then—

JIZZ.

Her hand catches the first, but that's just splash damage.

The rest?

Some of it hits the table leg.

Some of it probably sails off into theoretical space.

God, if He exists (spoiler: He doesn't), would need a tape measure, a microscope, and a mop.

But He doesn't, so **fuck Him**.

Lily pulls back slowly, lips wet, breath steady.

Wipes her hand with the bar napkin like she just finished shelling shrimp.

“You screamed,” she says.

He nods, barely alive.

“I *knew* you would.”

The bartender sets down the next two glasses without flinching.

Not a glance under the table. Not a whiff of judgment.

Just that **extremely professional oblivion** found only in veterans of barwork and battlefield trauma.

Sticky floor? Janitor’s problem.

Muffled moans? Not in the job description.

A woman licking jizz off her hand like it’s aioli?

Whatever—she tipped well last round.

Lily raises her hand, tongue flicking over her knuckles like a lazy cat cleaning the aftermath of slaughter. One finger. Then another. She’s not showing off. She’s *refueling*.

She sets one glass in front of him, keeps the other.

Clink.

They drink like comrades who survived something unspeakable and glorious.

Then—him, still glowing, still halfway in post-orgasmic purgatory—lifts his right hand.

Middle and ring fingers extended.

“Drool on them.”

Not *please*. Not *may I*.

Just that.

She raises an eyebrow, impressed. And not a little turned on by the quiet dominance of it.

“Why?”

“Because I’m about to finger the shit out of your memory.”

And oh, yes—

She opens her mouth.

Lets a slow stream of spit run down his fingers.

A silk ribbon of **filth and reverence**.

No need for the choreography now.

We've all seen the act—the bouncy rhythm, the scripted chaos, the breathy "*oh god, yeah*" like a sacred chant on repeat.

It's a show. It's polished. It sells.

But this—

This isn't a scene.

This is Lily Thai with fire in her eyes.

Real fire.

Not the performative kind that winks at the camera—

but the blaze you see in a woman who has no lines left to say, no walls left to hold, no God left to bargain with.

And he—

He isn't fucking her.

He's **rewriting her nervous system.**

He's not kissing her—he's *inhaling* her screams,
dragging them from her throat like a miner pulling
diamonds out of volcanic ash.

She's not moaning anymore. She's *howling*.
And she *knows*—in that disembodied, melted-cortex
way—that she's already squirted gallons.
Not droplets.

Gallons.

So much that now, each fresh gush lands with a
ridiculous, cartoonish "*splish splash*" on the puddle
that's turned the floor into a Slip 'n Slide to hell.

Her legs don't move. They twitch.
Her body doesn't arch. It *levitates*.
And her soul?

Gone.

Flew east of the sun, west of the moon, somewhere
in orbit around Alpha Centauri, probably moaning
too.

And him?

Still there.
Still going.
Not for ego.
Not for show.

For her.

Because this isn't sex.
It's revenge on silence.
It's justice for every fake moan ever performed.
It's a man saying: *You are myth. And I worship
myth until it floods the fucking world.*

She collapses.

Fully.

Not the sexy, pornified swoon. No fluttering lashes.
No dramatic exhale.
Just *ragdoll*.
Like someone cut the strings and dropped the
goddess.

He panics. Eyes wide. He leans in—
“Lily?”

No response.

“Fuck—Lily?!”

Then, a twitch. A flicker.

She turns her head, eyes half-lidded, lips parting.

“Still here…”

A breath.

“Just like that… just… a little dehydrated.”

Relief floods him like post-nut clarity times ten.

“Pitcher. Two shots. NOW.”

Moments later:

She gulps straight from the pitcher like a beast
revived.

One shot. Two shots.

Barely breathes between them.

He nods at the bar again. **“Two more.”**

Enter Waitress.

Doing her duty.

Carrying shots.

Stepping—

SPLASH.

Physics says no.

Gravity says *fuck you*.

Her feet shoot skyward in a perfect **scissor kick**, tray
airborne, time slows.

Then—

CRACK.

WILHELM SCREAM.

Somewhere, a bottle shatters.

Somewhere else, the janitor feels a disturbance in
the mop force.

Lily, still floor-adjacent, eyes the chaos.

“Run?”

He doesn't blink.

“RUN.”

They bolt—her barefoot, him belt still unbuckled,
the carwash Civic waiting like a getaway chariot—

Because when sex floods the room and comedy
breaks its hip on a slick of squirt,

you don’t apologize.

You don’t explain.

You fucking run.

He sprints. Then the Civic coughs.

Once. Twice. Then lets out a mechanical **sigh** of
resignation and rolls, heroically and pathetically, to
a dead halt in front of a neon-lit dive bar called *“The
Rusty Flamingo.”*

They burst out laughing like fugitives who've made
it to the border with nothing but adrenaline, jizz
stains, and a pitcher of tequila's worth of bad
decisions.

He turns to her, eyebrows raised—a silent *"One more?"*

She meets the glance. Then grins.

"The carwash was a coupon."

And that's when he really sees her.

The tank top's frayed. Washed too many times by a laundromat that doesn't believe in mercy.

Jeans? Slightly too big. Not styled—*survived*.

And the shoes? Functional. Invisible. Worn not to impress, but to get somewhere.

Life-sized Lily.

The myth... with rent.

He nods. Offers his hand like it's the first real moment of the whole damn day.

"Name's Andrew, by the way."

She takes it.

"Nice to meet you, Andy."

And *just like that*, he becomes Andy.

No fanfare. No ceremony. Just *fact*.

Then she leans back, exhales.

“Thank you for coming.”

He nearly drives the Civic into a lamppost laughing.

She punches his arm.

“I *meant* showing up. In general.”

He shrugs, mock solemn.

“Apparently the universe wants me to buy you another drink.”

She spreads her arms.

“Mind you, I have no more fluids in me.”

He flexes his hand.

“Not much strength left in my arm.”

She leans against the seat.

“Good.”

“Yeah... good.”

They sit there, breathing, laughing, ruined, reborn.

The dive bar waits. The night's still young.
And neither of them has any fucking clue what
comes next.

Perfect.

They walk into **The Rusty Flamingo**, and it's
everything it promises to be:
Wood-paneled sorrow, neon regret, and a jukebox
stuck on Tom Petty.

No questions. No decisions.

Shots.

Tequila.

Then bourbon.

Then something blue and probably illegal.

They laugh.

Big, belly laughs.

The kind that shake off the barnacles of the soul.

The kind only two people laugh when they've seen
the abyss and left it on read.

No need for talk. Just the kind of giggle fits that feel
like kindergarten with liquor.

But **Lily** watches him.

Shot by shot.

She sees it.

The humor that doesn't chase joy, it *protects* it.

Eyes like **old leather chairs**—worn, cracked, soft in
places only ghosts sit.

She recognizes it.

The *bend*, not the break.

The **sadness that walks beside him like a loyal, tired
dog.**

And she sees **herself**. Reflected. Bent. Warped.
Familiar.

Then—

She sets her shot glass down. Doesn't smile. Just
asks:

**“How many times a day you think about killing
yourself?”**

Andrew doesn't blink. Doesn't flinch.

“At least twice. You?”

And that's it.

The unspoken truth.

He read her too.

All of her.

Two **distorted mirrors** facing each other.

Each infinite.

Each cracked.

Somewhere, Borges smokes a cigarette and nods slowly.

She says, deadpan:

“At least thrice.”

He raises an eyebrow.

“Thrice?”

She smiles.

“I always dreamed of saying it.”

And that cracks them both open again.

Laughter.

Pure. Free. Messy. Holy.

The kind that keeps you alive.

Even when living is just a side gig.

They keep drinking, but slower now.

Not because they're pacing.

Because they're *remembering*.

Each shot is a toast to a scar.

No more need for jokes.

They've made it through the firewall of laughter
into something rawer.

The silence where truths come uninvited.

The jukebox mutters some forgotten country ballad
in the background.

Tom Waits would approve.

Lily twirls her glass. Doesn't look at him.

**"Do you ever pretend you're not suicidal just so the
people who love you won't feel guilty when you
finally do it?"**

Andrew:

"Every fucking Tuesday."

Pause.

"And Friday afternoons."

She nods.

“Sunday mornings for me. People are vulnerable on Sundays. Too much light, too many expectations.”

He studies her now. The way she speaks like she’s laying out receipts for cosmic debt.

“Ever practice the suicide note in your head and then get mad because no one would read it properly anyway?”

She taps the rim of her glass.

“I rehearsed one once that included footnotes and a recommended soundtrack.”

“Did it have an intermission?”

“With wine pairings.”

They both smile.

Not laughs.

Not yet.

Just the crack at the edge of a dam.

Then Andrew says:

“If we kill ourselves, they’ll say it was sudden.”

“Or selfish.”

“Or that we didn’t reach out.”

“We’re *reaching out right now*,” she says, spreading her arms like a crucifixion gone casual.

“Yeah,” he says, raising his shot, **“cheers to that.”**

They drink.

Silence.

Then, the laugh comes again.
Small. Inappropriate. Relieving.

Like a fart at a funeral.

She wipes a tear.

“Jesus, I’m so broken.”

He raises an eyebrow.

**“You’re in a bar called The Rusty Flamingo,
drinking with a man who came in his pants an hour
ago. Broken is a baseline.”**

They burst out again.

Not because it’s funny.

Because *it has to be*.

They’ve quieted again.

The air’s thick, not with tension—just *truth fatigue*.

The kind that comes after confessions, after shared
suicidal blueprints, after the kind of laughter that
only ruins can echo.

Andrew, staring into the swirl of his bourbon like it
holds answers, asks it softly:

“Sorry to ask, but… the films. The money?”

Lily doesn’t even flinch.

Doesn’t blink.

“Big family.”

He nods.

Gets it.

That’s code. For: *They took it. Every cent. Every drop of fake glamour monetized by everyone but her.*

He tries again.

“Sales rights?”

She snorts, soft and bitter.

“Andy… only *you* still watch porn from ten years ago.”

“Let alone *pay* for it.”

He shrugs, guilty as charged.

“What can I do? I’m old-fashioned.”

She smirks, until—

SLAP.

Light. Familiar. Affectionate.

“Never say *old* about me.”

He laughs, and lifts his hands in surrender.

But then, quieter:

“Cumming watching your face a couple hours ago...

That was the live version of the records.

Same melody. Same tempo. Same magic.

You didn’t change a bit.”

And she breaks.

Not shattered. Not sobbing.

Just...

tears.

Not because it’s a lie.

But because it’s *not*.

Because he didn't say it to flatter.

He said it with the tone of a man who's *seen her*.

Not the myth. Not the pornstar.

Her.

And he chose, in that moment,

to **elevate her**,

not fix her.

Not save her.

Just **honor her**.

And that's the most painful thing of all.

Because no one's done it in years.

She wipes her cheek, clumsy and embarrassed.

"Fuck you, Andy."

He raises his glass.

"Thrice."

And that gets the laugh back.

Even if it's through the tears.

They sit there, marinated in whiskey, grief, and that strange erotic glue that binds two people who've both seen the edge and flipped it off.

Lily exhales, looking up at the ceiling fan like it might drop a message from the divine or at least blow the despair around a little.

"Andy... this is the part in the movie where I'd invite you to my place."

Pause.

"But I don't have a place."

He looks over. She's not dramatic about it. Just *true*.

"You open my trunk, you find my life. A couple of suitcases, some cardboard boxes, and my two best vibrators. My place is the next cheapest motel with working locks and no dead bodies in the ice machine."

"Same here," he says, like he's saying *cheers*.

She blinks.

“Hey—your car! We left it at the carwash!”

“I don’t have a car.”

She squints.

“What…?”

“I saw you from across the street. It had to be you. I crossed traffic mid-light. Almost died twice.”

She waves him off, wipes another tear.

Half go to hell, half thank you for existing.

“I’m wearing all I own,” he adds.

She snorts, half-choke.

“Jeezus, you’re matching me.”

He lifts his glass again.

“At least I can split the bill at that motel.”

She turns her head slowly, *very* slowly, and gives him the face.

That **face**.

Sultry. Feral. Cartoon devil with a PhD in bad decisions.

“And could you split *me*··?”

Beat.

Then she flinches.

“Oh no, darling. Not tonight. Not after *before*.”

He grins, deep and unfiltered.

“‘After before’··? I think you’d make Hemingway orgasm just telling him that.”

She throws her head back and *cackles*.

And outside, under the indifferent stars and the broken “O” of the Rusty Flamingo’s sign, the universe finally nods in approval of its two weirdest, saddest, funniest little miracles finding each other.

Inside their heads, exactly at the same time—

Her: *“He knows Hemingway…”*

Him: *“She knows Hemingway…”*

Then, both:

“Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

And the ghost of Bogart lights a cigarette in the rafters and mutters, *“Finally, someone’s using that line right.”*

Outside their heads—

Them:

“SHOTS! SHOTS! SHOTS!”

They slam the bar like frat kids possessed by Bukowski.

The bartender, who’s seen worse (barely), lines them up like dominoes of oblivion.

They down one.

Grimace.

Laugh.

Down another.

Laugh harder.

They made it.

Pushed her Civic in neutral down two quiet streets, one cursed incline, and finally into the U-shaped purgatory of a **\$31.44-a-night motel** called “The Whispering Palms,” where not one palm tree had whispered in decades.

The neon flickered “VAC NCY,” because *E* had long died, like hope.

They took a twin-bed room because it was cheaper and because, at that point, even their lust needed a nap.

They collapsed—each to a bed.

Shoes on. Clothes still half-unzipped from hours

ago.

No kisses.

No more words.

Just *coma*.

Advanced Morning.

Too late to be early. Too early to be decent.

The groan comes first.

Non-verbal. Soul-deep.

Might be pain. Might be joy. Could be gas.

One of them stirred. The other followed.

Andrew turns.

And there she is.

Lily.

Hungover.

Face puffed like a boxer who almost won.

Pillow lines tattooed across her cheek like war paint.

Hair?

An absolute war crime.

Smell?

Somewhere between tequila, lemon-scented car
freshener, and despair sweat.

And still—

Jesus Christ.

She's beautiful.

Not just hot.

Not just sexy.

But ***pornographically holy.***

So viscerally, sinfully *female* that if morning wood
had a face, it'd be hers.

And in that fragile, hazy moment, he does what no
man should ever do in morning-after silence:

He speaks the truth.

"I knew it."

She blinks, head heavy, still dazed.

"I *knew* you'd be beautiful like this."

She groans.

“No, listen—hangover and all. Swollen, hair a crime scene, creases on your face like a goddamn napkin—*and still*, I swear on whiskey and despair, you are the hottest thing I’ve ever seen. If this isn’t proof of God, it’s proof of evolution overachieving.”

And she just stares.

Eyes glassy.

Mouth slightly open.

Then—

A laugh.

Half-snort, half-giggle, **half-choke.**

Followed by tears.

Real ones.

Not dramatic.

Just awe.

And through the tears she laughs harder.

The kind of laugh you make when someone touches

your *invisible wounds* and makes them feel kissed
instead of pitied.

She wipes her face with the motel sheet like that's
normal.

"Fuck you, Andy."

"Thrice," he mutters.

And again, they laugh.

Because it's too late to cry.

And far too early to stop needing each other.

Steam thick as cream surrounds them.

Two ghosts made flesh again by cheap motel water
pressure and the baptism of regret.

They shower.

Together.

No flirt. No seduction.

Just *need*.

To be *touched* without agenda.

To be *seen* without framing.

Lily moves first.

“Let me wash you.”

He doesn’t protest.

She does it gently.

Not like a lover.

Not like a nurse.

Like a **servant-priestess** in a religion of ruin.

Hands over scars. Palms over ribs.

Soap and sorrow.

It’s not sexual.

It’s sacred.

She traces his shoulder blades like a cartographer of pain.

When she's done, she kisses the back of his neck.
Soft. Platonic. Final.

Then—

“Now let me wash you,” he says.

She freezes.

“I know that look.”

He cocks his head, amused.

**“I know you didn't film anal because Lucy Lee
ripped your asshole with a dildo the size of a
jackhammer.”**

She stares.

Then *beams*.

“My God... you *really* are my fan!”

He grins.

Works shampoo into his fingers.

“Did you recover?”

She pauses.

Voice low.

“I did…”

He turns her.

Presses her gently but firmly against the motel tile.

Cool porcelain.

Warm water.

Shampoo running like sacrament.

Three fingers.

No warning.

Just *truth*.

She gasps.

Not in pain. Not yet.

In memory.

And thinks: *“Uh-oh. Rip rip again.”*

But she says, eyes wild, voice full of defiance and
longing:

“God, I love you when it hurts.”

And that—

that is when the universe, already drunk, slow claps in the rain.

Later.

She limps—**gracefully, heroically, tragically**—to her bed like a war veteran who stormed the beaches of Normandy with her ass.

“God, you really ripped me again,” she mutters, collapsing onto the mattress with a theatrical sigh.

“And on purpose,” he replies, casually pulling on the same whiskey-scented, slightly-sticky shirt from the night before.

“I know,” she smiles, patting her hair dry with a motel towel that used to be white but now dreams of beige.

“And I love it.”

She stands to grab her jeans, but stops—both of them looking down.

On the cheap floral bedspread, where she had just sat—

a glorious, vivid, unapologetic red stain.

Like a Jackson Pollock tribute to bad decisions and anal penetration.

She squints at it.

“Oh look! Just like after Lucy Lee!”

He puffs up with pride.

Not toxic masculinity—*sacred masculinity*.

The kind forged in the fires of knowing your lover's back catalogue.

“I’m so proud of myself.”

She lifts her hand.

“Give it here, champ.”

High five.

Solid. Wet-palm. Undeniably victorious.

Then, the look.

That **shared** look.

Her: *"Now run?"*

Him: *"Definitely run."*

Because if history taught them anything, it's this:

Sex is temporary.

Love is complicated.

But hotel housekeeping is forever.

Some things can't be explained. Like déjà vu. Or motel carpet stains. Or why an empty fuel tank can refill itself through sheer narrative necessity.

But Andy had heard of it—

The Myth of the Magic Car.

Where a vehicle, dry as a bone yesterday, suddenly grunts, coughs, and says *"Eh, fuck it"* the next morning.

Might as well try.

He turns the key.

Chut.

Sput.

Vrrr.

Vroom.

Not a Mustang **VAROOOOOOM**, mind you.

More of a *“do your best, little Civic”* vroom.

A sigh. A burp. A whisper of dignity.

He rolls it out of the lot like a hearse with stage fright, crawling toward the nearest gas station with the gravity of a funeral and the urgency of a toddler on a tricycle.

Once there, he disappears into the mini-mart.

When he returns, he’s carrying a plastic bag.

Inside:

- One 4-pack of T-shirts
- One 4-pack of socks
- Gloves

- A polyester scarf
- A polyester beanie
(All in a shade of gray that screams “**bulk discount**”)

She watches him silently as he gets in.

Her: “You’re really wearing all you own.”

Him: “Don’t ask.”

Her: “Didn’t mean to.”

Him: “Who drives?”

She leans back, smiling like a poet who just found a rhyme no one else could see.

“I just love this.

Not *where*..

but *who*.”

And suddenly, it doesn’t matter that the tank’s almost empty again,
that their clothes are soaked in motel soap, sweat,
and shame,
or that the road ahead has no clear destination.

They've got a Civic.
They've got pain.
They've got each other.

And in this broken comedy of despair...
that's enough.

He drives.

Windows down.
The sun's rising sideways, like it's too hungover to
commit.
The road stretches ahead like a therapy session they
can't afford.
Tank's full—for now. That's all that matters.

Then she asks it.

Casually. Like one asks if you want fries.

“Hey, do you have a feeties fetish?”

He scoffs.

A proper **disgusted-with-you-for-even-doubting-me** scoff.

“If I have a feeties fetish… Ask an Italian if he likes mozzarella.”

She grins.

And without another word, she slips off her sneaker with a practiced grace that says *this isn't her first car-foot rodeo*.

The sock follows—
not balled, not tossed—**unfurled like a flag of surrender.**

Then—
her foot is on his mouth.

“Jubil your heart out.”

And he does.

He takes it like communion.
Each toe gets its own chapter.
Big toe's a gospel.
Pinkie toe, a prayer.
He moves to the arch, whispering admiration into
the skin.
Then—

The sole.

Oh, the **sole**.

He licks with reverence.
But that's where it goes wrong.

He gets too into it.
Eyes close.
Head tilts.
Tongue working like a man rediscovering religion
through calluses and lavender lotion.

And—

HONK!

SWERVE!

Incoming traffic flashes past.

She jerks her foot back, laughing mid-panic, then props both feet up on the dashboard like royalty riding shotgun.

**“So it’s look, don’t touch on a moving vehicle.
Registered.”**

He grips the wheel like a scolded child who just dropped communion wine.

“Yes ma’am.”

They drive on.

Feet on display.

Mouth full of regret and residual toe taste.

**Love, or something like it, brewing in the rearview
mirror.**

Her bare feet press against the windshield, fogging it with human heat and rebellion.

Seatbelt unbuckled like she's daring physics to try something.

She pulls out her phone, scrolling with her thumb. Smiling like she knows what's coming will *hurt*.

"Wanna listen to something?"

Andy glances over, cautious.

"You know when you're so depressed you fall back into that teenage headspace?"

"Like your crush rejected you again for the eighth time and all you do is listen on loop to *that* one song that knows exactly where your wounds live?"

Her eyes light up like she's met a fellow survivor at a war reunion.

"You have that too?"

"All the time."

She leans in, like they're in a blanket fort and
nothing outside matters.

"What's your loop now?"

He doesn't say it.

He just taps the screen.

And **THE VOICE** kicks in.

The car is instantly smaller.

The air, heavier.

The gravity, emotional.

The. Voice.

**"In the wee small hours of the morning
While the whole wide world is fast asleep..."**

The strings slide in like a knife dipped in velvet.

Her lips part.

His hands tighten on the wheel.

The world disappears.

**“You lie awake and think about the girl
And never, ever think of counting sheep…”**

It cuts.

Not surgically.

Not kindly.

This isn't healing.

This is *witnessing the autopsy of your own fucking heart.*

And when the verse drops—

“When your lonely heart has learned its lesson
You’d be hers if only she would call…”

They’re both gone.

Tears.

Ugly, snotty, throat-closing sobs.

Like 18-year-olds after the first real breakup.

Only this time?

Everything is broken.

The dreams.

The backup plans.

The illusions.

All shattered.

Frank sings on.

“In the wee small hours of the morning

That’s the time you miss her most of all…”

She curls her knees up to her chest.

He leans forward over the steering wheel like it's
holding him together.

No words.

No comfort.

Just the *wound*.

Shared.

Open.

Alive.

After the sobbing ebbs like a tide finally bored of
devastation, the car goes quiet.

Sun climbing higher.

Wind threading through open windows.

Their silence is heavy but bearable now—like a coat
soaked in grief, but finally warm.

Andy clears his throat, soft.

“So… what’s your loop now?”

Lily exhales, uneasy.

“You wouldn’t like it.”

“Try me.”

“You’ll laugh.”

“I won’t.”

She hesitates. Then presses play.

“Back to Me” by The Marías starts.

Sultry.

Dreamy.

Delicate like lingerie that wants to be a lullaby.

She looks at him.

He doesn’t look back.

Eyes on the road.

Jaw still.

But she sees it—
the lower eyelid twitch.

A tell.

“You’re not laughing.”

“I am not.”

“But you don’t like it.”

“I do not.”

Beat.

“Back to Sinatra?”

“DEFINITELY back to Sinatra.”

And he cues it up without hesitation.

The big band.

The swell.

The bittersweet smile of a man already half-eulogized in brass and heartbreak.

“Time after time
I tell myself that I'm
So lucky to be loving you...”

Her eyes flutter closed.
He taps the steering wheel to the rhythm like he's
holding the world together, one beat at a time.

“So lucky to be
The one you run to see in the evening
When the day is through...”

They don't speak.
Don't move.

They just *exist*.

Together.

In this dusty little Civic, driving through their
respective wreckage,

Sinatra as their co-pilot,

and silence as their witness.

"I only know what I know

The passing years will show

You've kept my love so young, so new..."

Her: *"I really hate how this hurts."*

Him: *"Yeah. Me too."*

Her: *"...Again?"*

Him: *"Again."*

And they let it play.

Again.

And again.

They drive. Still buzzing from Sinatra and the tears,
from toes and grief and the kind of broken laughter
that rewires your brain.

Then—it **appears**.

A bend.

A vista.

The red rock mouth of the earth itself:

Canyon de Chelly.

They both freeze.

Stare.

Then slowly, dramatically, turn to each other.

Andy: “Thelma and Louise.”

Lily: “Oh *yes* please. So *MUCH* Thelma and
Louise.”

Andy: “Find a road to the edge.”

Lily: “No signal.”

Andy: “Damn you, technology that in 1990 two girls
didn’t need!”

Lily: “Do like them!”

Andy: “Yeah.”

He jerks the wheel.

The Civic jumps off the asphalt like a rebellious mall cart and hits the dirt path with all the grace of a brick in a tumble dryer.

Car: *sandsssssspittttt-clunk.*

Lily, naturally **unbuckled**, is airborne.

A shriek, a *WHEEEEEEE*, then silence.

Then—

Andy leaps out mid-roll, the Civic skidding sideways into a heroic pose.

He scrambles across scrub and rock.

Then—**feet**.

Two dusty, pale feet sticking *out of a bush*, toes twitching like nervous antennae.

And a voice:

“Ouch. Ouch. OUCH.”

Andy: “Lucky it’s not a cactus. No thorns.”

Lily (from inside the foliage): “Still has splinters.
And one just ripped my asshole open *again*. Ouch.
Ouch.”

He pulls the branches back.

There she is.

Upside down.

Hair full of leaves.

Eyes full of murderous glee.

Pants—well, let’s not look too close.

She grins.

“Now *that’s* what I call continuity.”

He offers a hand.

She slaps it away.

“Get me a medic. Or a shot. Or Frank.”

Night. Desert motel.

A dusty sign flickers “*Sundown Inn — \$71.99 + tax*”
like a sick joke.

Same shitty layout. Same brittle towels.

But now it costs more because **John Wayne shot a movie twenty miles from here once** and now the canyon's a damn Instagram backdrop.

Inside, fluorescent lights hum like a drunk mosquito.

Lily is naked.

But not sexy naked.

Not *cinematic glow* or *pouty pose* naked.

Prone.

Flat.

Arms and legs spread like she's about to be embalmed.

Sheets scratchy. Ass perforated. Soul at peace.

Andy sits beside her, dabbing with a cotton ball and the gentlest touch his big, broken hands can muster.

Her: "Ouch. Ouch. OUCH."

Him: *dab*

**kiss*

dab

kiss

“I bought the pediatric one! The pharmacist swore
kids don’t even feel it!”

Her: *“I know. I’m acting for the kisses.”*

Him: doesn’t stop.

Doesn’t smile.

Just kisses more.

The back of her thighs.

The small of her back.

Her shoulder blades.

The bruise blooming on her hip like a birthmark of
disaster.

And then, slowly, religiously—

He kisses **every inch** of her.

Not fucking.

Not even foreplay.

Worship.

Her, eyes down, buried in motel pillow foam,
mutters, almost ashamed:

“I’ve been shot from every angle imaginable.”

“But no one’s ever kissed me there.”

Silence.

Then—another kiss.

This time between the bruises.

Right on the scar no one ever noticed because it was
just *off-frame*.

Desert night.

Not cold, but deep.

The kind of night that listens.

Smells like dust, old wood, and wind that
remembers dinosaurs.

The motel's dead quiet. Vacancy sign flickering just for them.

They've dragged out two busted plastic chairs and rolled themselves in every scratchy motel blanket available, looking like two prophets on leave.

She passes him a joint, half-rolled, slightly crumpled like it's seen some shit.

Lily: "Can you seal it? Never learned. I always make a mess."

Andy: *"Where did you even find weed? There's only us here."*

Lily: *"I know the desert."*

He stares at her.

She doesn't blink.

Just that little smirk, like a secret she never needed to explain.

Andy: "That's why there's only one Lily Thai."

She smirks wider, but doesn't look at him. Not yet.

Andy: *"Did you hear what I said, Miss Lily Thai?
You're absolutely unique."*

She finally turns, eyes soft, lips curled.

Lily: "Shut up and seal."

And so he does.

He leans in.

Tongue to paper.

Steady hands.

He seals it like it matters, like it's a contract
between two broken planets agreeing to orbit each
other for just one more night.

She watches him the whole time.

Smiling.

And for once,

neither of them says a word.

Because in the desert,

silence is the truest compliment.

NEXT MORNING.

Civic rolling across early desert asphalt, the two of them wrapped in silence and hangover ghosts.

They're on the hunt:

Hot coffee.

A place sad enough to match their souls.

Then—

SCREECH.

Andy slams the brakes.

Reverses. Slowly.

A thrift store.

Half-crumbling.

Sun-faded mannequins in the window wearing 1950s prom gowns and a football helmet.

They stare.

Then stare at each other.

Both: “Let’s go with style.”

Hours later.

They are unrecognizable.

Andy in a pinstripe suit three sizes too big and shiny
black shoes clearly meant for funerals.

Lily in a velvet blazer, elbow-length gloves, and a
flapper dress that might have been part of a
Halloween costume in 1992.

Both in **top hats**.

Both carrying **canes**.

They walk—no, they **parade**—to the **Mummy Cave
Overlook** at Canyon de Chelly.

Pass the safety barrier like it’s a velvet rope.

Step out onto the rocky edge, **hands behind their
backs**, serene as saints on the gallows.

Below: a death drop.

Around: open air.

Behind: panic.

Tourists start screaming.

Phones raised.

Kids crying.

Moms clutching pearls.

Someone's already livestreaming.

Rangers are called.

More people arrive.

Now there's a **crowd**, and people start **stepping past the barrier**, drawn by the absurd courage, or the chance to film tragedy, or maybe just the hope of catching something *real*.

Then—

when the overlook is **packed**, voices raised, cameras rolling, hysteria peaking—

Andy and Lily turn.

Pull out their canes.

Tip their thrift top hats.

And in perfect sync—start to dance.

**“Hello, my baby!
Hello, my honey!
Hello, my ragtime gal!”**

The crowd gasps.
Some cheer.
Some scream louder.

**“Send me a kiss by wire,
Baby, my heart’s on fire!”**

They twirl.
They kick.
It’s vaudeville at the gates of eternity.

**“If you refuse me,
Honey, you lose me,
Then you’ll be left alone…”**

Lily grins.
Andy bows.

“Oh baby, telephone
And tell me I’m—
Your own!”

And then—
backwards—
hand in hand—
top hats still on—
they jump.

Into the canyon.

Into the sky.

Into the legend.

FIN.

(Cue Sinatra.)

*“Time after time,
You’ll hear me say that I’m
So lucky… to be loving you.”*

She was the last honest orgasm on film, the porn myth who vanished while shame learned to speak Wi-Fi, and he was just another broken man limping through the wreckage of his own desire, but when Lily Thai—legend in exile, queen of the real moan—collides with Andy, poet of the suicidal and high priest of the Civic, they set off across a landscape of cheap motels, ruined jukeboxes, grief-soaked whiskey, and roadside miracles, laughing through despair, fucking through history, dancing at the edge of the world in thrift-store top hats while Sinatra croons for the damned and the divine alike; together, they don't just love, they detonate—leaping from the canyon's edge into myth, rewriting what it means to survive ruin with a grin, a scream, a splatter, and a waltz; this isn't just sex, or comedy, or tragedy, or redemption—this is prophecy with teeth, vaudeville with lube, the gospel according to Lily, and you, dear reader, are about to believe again. Just like that.

The Washington Post

"Alba Pratalia has written the most human book of the decade, hidden inside a sex-drenched fever dream."

The Guardian

"Unflinching, obscene, and strangely transcendent—*Just Like That* is a literary Molotov cocktail."